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ABSTRACT

THE FOLLOWING IS THE FULL TEXT OF THIS DOCUMENT: LEVEL: High school and college. AUTHOR'S COMMENT: Many would like to abandon the distinction between "lay" and "lie," but I still receive enough questions about it to continue teaching it. Finding that students did not believe me when I taught them to substitute "recline" for "lie," because "The rug reclines on the floor" sounds silly, I decided to work out a new lesson. The verb "to be" is a perfect substitute for "to lie" and even saves words: "The book is lying (being) on the table" shortens to "The book is on the table"; "lying" like "being" is often superfluous. FIRST LESSON: Of course, I start with the easier "lay" and use "place" for its substitute because the "d" is a perfect clue: "laid" must always mean "placed." Thus the principal parts: present tense--lay (place); past tense--laid (placed); past participle--laid (placed); present participle--laying (placing). Substituting "be" for "lie" is more complicated because "be" has many forms: (1) Present tense--I lie (am); you, we, they lie (are); she, he, it lies (is); [and] (2) Past tense--I, she, he, it lay (was); you, we, they lay (were). The past participle is easy because "lain" always equals "been" with the "n" for a perfect clue. The present participle "lying" always equals "being." SECOND LESSON: I warn against cliches and slang. Instead of "lay off," they must use "avoid"; instead of "laid back," they must choose "relaxed." The only ambiguous usage is that with land: dictionaries allow both "lay of the land" and "lie of the land"; but I can explain both. "Lay of the land" refers to nature's having placed it, and "lie of the land" means the way the land is. Although I usually complain about sports language, golfers are good here: the ball has a good or bad "lie." I caution students not to think about whether a sentence discusses placing or reclining; rather the secret is to substitute my test words directly. I recommend that students take advantage of the time they spend waiting for traffic lights to change by repeating "lying there" to kill the old, bad habit. "Laying down" is wrong except in the sentence "The soldiers were laying down their arms," but "laying there" is always wrong. EXERCISES: Sentences help students; I usually put the answers on the reverse of the worksheet in case students need confirmation. 1. Do not [blank] in the sun (lie=be). 2. The rug [blank] on the floor, now that the man has [blank] it (lies=is, laid=placed). 3. Your letter is [blank]ing on the table (lying=being=unnecessary). 4. Mother has [blank] in bed most of the day (lain=been). 5. I [blank] awake trying to remember where I had [blank] the receipt (lay=was, laid=placed). 6. L[blank]ing the paper on the desk, she left the room (laying=placing). 7. They left the papers [blank]ing on the desk (lying=being=unnecessary). 8. I will [blank] your fears to rest as soon as I explain the situation (lay=place). 9. A technical writer needs to understand magazine [blank]out (layout=placement). 10. Since I could not repair the pipe, I [blank] my tools aside (laid=placed). RESULTS: Students need convincing; they cannot believe that the lesson is as easy as it looks. But once they find that the substitutes work ("lay"="place" and "lie"="be"), they use the words with confidence. (Author)

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# Lay or Lie?

*Barbara R. Dubois* University of New Mexico

## Level

High school and college

## Author's Comment

Many would like to abandon the distinction between "lay" and "lie," but I still receive enough questions about it to continue teaching it. Finding that students did not believe me when I taught them to substitute "recline" for "lie," because "The rug reclines on the floor" sounds silly, I decided to work out a new lesson. The verb "to be" is a perfect substitute for "to lie" and even saves words: "The book is lying (being) on the table" shortens to "The book is on the table"; "lying" like "being" is often superfluous.

## First Lesson

Of course, I start with the easier "lay" and use "place" for its substitute because the "d" is a perfect clue: "laid" must always mean "placed." Thus the principal parts:

| present tense | past tense | past participle | present participle |
|---|---|---|---|
| lay (place) | laid (placed) | laid (placed) | laying (placing) |

Substituting "be" for "lie" is more complicated because "be" has many forms:

| **Present tense** | **past tense** |
|---|---|
| I lie (am) | I, she, he, it lay (was) |
| you, we, they lie (are) | you, we, they lay (were) |
| she, he, it lies (is) | |

The past participle is easy because "lain" always equals "been" with the "n" for a perfect clue.
The present participle "lying" always equals "being."

## Second Lesson

I warn against cliches and slang. Instead of "lay off," they must use "avoid"; instead of "laid back," they must choose "relaxed." The only ambiguous usage is that with land: dictionaries allow both "lay of the land" and "lie of the land"; but I can explain both. "Lay of the land" refers to nature's having *placed* it, and "lie of the land" means the way the land *is*. Although I usually complain about sports language, golfers are good here: the ball has a good or bad "lie."

I caution students not to think about whether a sentence *discusses* placing or reclining; rather the secret is to substitute my test words directly. I recommend that students take advantge of the time they spend waiting for traffic lights to change by repeating "lying there" to kill the old, bad habit. "Laying down" is wrong except in the sentence "The soldiers were laying down their arms," but "laying there" is always wrong.

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## Exercises

Sentences help students; I usually put the answers on the reverse of the worksheet in case students need confirmation.

1. Do not _____in the sun. (lie = be)
2. The rug_____on the floor, now that the man has_____it. (lies = is, laid = placed)
3. Your letter is_____ing on the table. (lying=being=unnecessary)
4. Mother has_____in bed most of the day. (lain=been)
5. I_____awake trying to remember where I had.....the receipt. (lay=was, laid=placed)
6. L_____ing the paper on the desk, she left the room. (Laying=Placing)
7. They left the papers_____ing on the desk. (lying=being=unnecessary)
8. I will_____your fears to rest as soon as I explain the situation. (lay=place)
9. A technical writer needs to understand magazine_____out. (layout=placement)
10. Since I could not repair the pipe, I_____my tools aside. (laid=placed)

## Results

Students need convincing; they cannot believe that the lesson is as easy as it looks. But once they find that the substitutes work ("lay"="place" and "lie"= "be"), they use the words with confidence.